



Covid-19 Helpline Report

September 2021



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INTRODUCTION

Covid-19 brought all activities and programmes across the prison estate to a halt and meant that we were unable to deliver the four-week StandOut Programme to men approaching release from HMP Wandsworth and HMP Pentonville.

In order to stop the spread of Covid-19, prisons went into full lockdown confining people to their cells for an average of **23 hours a day**. With services withdrawn there was very little preparation for release which meant that often people were heading to the gate with the **£46 discharge grant**, belongings in a plastic bag, and nowhere to go.

The StandOut Helpline service was developed as a response to the crisis and the critical needs of people leaving prison. StandOut coaches went into prison each week, throughout the pandemic, and spoke through the gaps in cell doors to men who were coming up for release. They offered advice and support across a wide range of issues and encouraged men to call the Helpline. A game changer for the Helpline came in July 2020 when the freephone number was made available for men to call from inside prison. This enabled coaches to assess people's needs and put in place the necessary support for release.

StandOut coaches offered support with a range of issues: navigating benefits applications, accessing emergency housing, support with food, clothing and other essential supplies, guidance on Covid lockdown rules and coaching around employment including drafting CVs over the telephone.

Although planned as a temporary response, the Helpline ran for **15 months** and in that time received more than **4,000 calls** and provided support to **608 men**. As services return to prisons and activities resume, we paused the Helpline at the end of July 2021 so that the StandOut coaching team could return to the in-person group work for which we are known.

This report summarises learning from running the Helpline service during the pandemic and some of the challenges involved.

STATISTICS

4328 calls over fifteen months 

608 men supported 

53 release packs issued 

78 nights off the street 

LEARNING FROM THE HELPLINE

Evidence from the Helpline Service confirms that:

- Somewhere **safe to live** is the most important step towards stability.
- People need **basic essentials** in order to survive:
 - Food, clothing, and the means to travel
 - A mobile phone provides a lifeline to other support
 - ID and a bank account are critical for independent living
- **Employment** can only follow when these markers of stability are established.
- **Long-term holistic support**, based on trusting relationships, is key to lasting change.

It has also shone a spotlight on:

- The additional **barriers** for people on remand;
- The challenges faced by people with **immigration** issues, and
- The damaging impact of Friday releases.

SOMEWHERE SAFE TO LIVE

Housing issues have been the most immediate and pressing need for Helpline callers. In theory emergency accommodation was intended to be offered to all prison leavers for **56 days** through the government's Homelessness Prevention Taskforces (HPT). In reality many emerged at the gates without accommodation settled. On average callers with no accommodation were left **sleeping on the streets for three nights** before they were moved into temporary accommodation.

StandOut was able to step in to ensure that men had a roof over their heads, tiding them over until housing provision was worked out. Over the year we issued **53 accommodation grants**, representing **78 nights off the streets**.

For those housed by the HPTs, many people were given long stays in hotels built for short stays, some without access to facilities to cook.

Paul was released into a Travelodge in July. He called us in a state of despair as he had not eaten in days. Without cooking facilities or even a fridge, a food bank delivery was of limited use and so StandOut purchased non-perishable food that could be prepared using only a kettle.

When all other avenues had been exhausted, StandOut made referrals to **StreetLink**, a charity which links people who are homeless with local support services. Whilst StreetLink offers a vital service, a referral requires a StreetLink outreach worker to visit the individual at a pre-agreed outdoor location within 3 nights of the referral to make an assessment of need.

The requirement for an individual to remain at a specified location for a whole night is difficult for someone sleeping rough. If they miss the Streetlink outreach worker who is then unable to verify their homeless status, the referral process starts over again. **This results in more nights on the street.**

Jibreel was released from prison on 21st December. By the time he reached out to StandOut, he had been sleeping in the stairwell of a block of flats for a week over Christmas and New Year. His clothes were soaked through and was unable to walk because his feet were so cold and wet. StandOut made a referral to Streetlink but it took 9 nights for Jibreel to be picked up as he kept being moved on by the police from the pre-agreed location, or leaving for his own safety.

In March 2021, the government's HPT provision came to an end and StandOut saw the impact immediately with a surge of calls from people in housing crises. Our experience underlines the need for a **long-term solution to ensure people leaving prison are guaranteed somewhere safe to live.**

THE ESSENTIALS NEEDED TO SURVIVE



“I’ve just left prison, I’ve not got any clothes to wear and no food. I need help to buy some. I’m homeless and need help.”

In addition to somewhere safe to live, everyone should leave prison with the following things in place:

- access to the **basic essentials**: food, clothing and means to travel
- a **mobile phone** with credit
- a **bank account** and **ID**

When people are supported to get the basics sorted at the point of release, they have a better chance at moving forward and escaping the justice system for good. This rarely happens at the best of times but has been particularly challenging during the pandemic.

StandOut’s small bursary fund allowed us to step in and provide urgent support to **53 people** who left prison with only the clothes they stood in. We provided vouchers for food and travel, clothing packs, toiletries, and basic mobile phones with credit. **Mobile phones provide a lifeline to other vital support services.**

“I came out of prison in November in shorts and a t-shirt. Probation helped me get a room but I had no bedding, furniture or warm clothes. By helping me access a phone, I can now contact my family and probation and listen to the radio! The food parcel has just arrived – I didn’t know when I would next eat.”

Having widely accepted **identification and a bank account** is crucial for finding accommodation and starting work. However, accessing these important resources has been made harder for prison leavers during the pandemic.

Callers to the Helpline have frequently revealed that although support to open bank accounts and obtain ID was offered while the caller was still in prison, in practice, it didn't materialise. **It's a catch 22: you need formal ID to open a bank account but you also need identification to secure formal ID.**



StandOut Release Packs

One of the few positive outcomes from the Covid-19 pandemic is the introduction of the **DWP phone line** set up specifically for people leaving prison to claim benefits more easily. This also ensures people without a smart phone or internet connectivity can start a claim without visiting a job centre. This service should continue, but the delay in first payments is still too long. Facilitating prison leavers to make universal credit claims prior to release would address this timing gap.

In May 2021, the government announced it will increase the one-off discharge grant given to prison leavers from **£46 to £76**. This was the first time the grant had been changed in **25 years**. It is an overdue step but in the right direction. **More action is needed to give people the basic resources to survive for more than one day.**

EMPLOYMENT FOLLOWS STABILITY



It is only when people's immediate needs are met, and life begins to stabilise that StandOut has been able to offer its **unique employment and training support** to Helpline callers. Despite the challenges faced when leaving prison, many callers have been determined to find employment or take up training opportunities.

StandOut met Joey in prison in August. Soon to be released, he worked with StandOut coaches via his in-cell phone to write a CV and make a plan for his release. Joey was released in December and StandOut supported him with a release pack of clothes and toiletries as well as helping Joey with emergency accommodation until he was able to find somewhere sustainable to live. Once his basic needs were met, Joey was able to complete further training and recently secured a job as an installer with a ventilation company.

Covid-19 had an immediate impact on the **job market and training opportunities**. In the absence of face-to-face work-related training, StandOut coaches connected callers to online training providers. This introduced new obstacles such as people not having access to a computer or a suitable environment to study at home. In almost every call, StandOut coaches focused on **helping people to maintain the motivation and resilience needed to handle the additional setbacks** presented by the pandemic. For those with the additional barrier of a criminal conviction, the intensive long-term support of organisations like StandOut will be vital as we emerge from the pandemic.

“I didn't have any connections coming out of prison. StandOut took that first bit of anxiety away - hooked me up with the right people. I've also had to do things for myself but StandOut gave me the resources that I needed to move things forward.”

THE NEED FOR LONG-TERM, HOLISTIC SUPPORT



“You gave me hope, when life was dark”

The Helpline has highlighted the enormous need faced by those leaving prison and the **gaps in support available**. It has also confirmed that for many prison leavers, particularly those with multiple and complex needs, it is unrealistic to expect them to navigate a series of appointments without the **support of someone who they trust and who understands the system**.

A key role of the Helpline was to **advocate or make connections** for people who were released without access to support. When men leave prison and are unable to get through to their probation officers, StandOut has provided **vital link-work support**, attempting on the caller's behalf to make contact with the relevant probation officer or to pass referrals to housing teams inside prison and to Streetlink.

Prior to release Pratik was not told who his probation officer was and when he left prison he had no fixed address. Unable to make contact with his probation officer after multiple attempts, StandOut provided Pratik with a hotel for the weekend. StandOut continued to chase up probation, emailing and calling leads, until locating the officer assigned to Pratik. Bridging the gap between probation, housing charities and the council, StandOut was able to advocate on Pratik's behalf.

The high number of safeguarding incidents relating to our Helpline callers, as opposed to our traditional programme trainees paints **a bleak picture of the challenge prison-leavers face when they lack means of support or infrastructure**.

ADDITIONAL BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT

Remand sentences

The issues facing all prison leavers are exacerbated for those on remand. The lack of a release date and uncertainty over trial dates means many are **unable to access support in prison**. Release can be unannounced leaving people with no opportunity to plan.

Sam was released at 8pm without notice. He was released in the clothes that he stood up in and had no accommodation or mobile phone. He had been on remand and so was not eligible for the discharge grant. He left with only the £23 he had on him when he went into prison.



Urgent action is needed to increase support for this forgotten group who make up **43%** of the prison population in our partner prisons HMP Wandsworth and HMP Pentonville. With increased time on remand due to the trial backlog caused by Covid, this group should be treated in the same way as sentenced prisoners with **access to the same essential support**. As a minimum they should be provided with a discharge grant.

Immigration issues

Covid-19 impacted every aspect of the criminal justice system, including immigration holds, deportations, appeals and extradition orders.

During the pandemic, there were weeks where the immigration staff did not attend prison or answer messages sent by men locked in their cells. This meant that Helpline support often involved chasing up the Home Office regarding a particular action or piece of communication received. It also included **providing information to callers** who were confused about their rights and responsibilities and whose situations were a catch-22 scenario.

StandOut supported Ahmed to make an Immigration Bail application but once this was approved, there were new problems. Ahmed could not be released from prison on immigration bail without an address, yet there were no housing services available to him due to his No recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) status. This catch-22 meant that Ahmed was stuck, serving an additional three months in prison whilst Immigration services tried and failed to find him accommodation. Eventually, Ahmed was transferred to an Immigration Detention Centre.

One of the most frustrating experiences for people in prison is **not feeling listened to or understood**. StandOut was one of the few third sector organisations to utilise **thebigword**, the international interpretation and language translation service. This meant that Helpline coaches were able to communicate effectively with foreign national callers during the pandemic. Widening access to translation services such as thebigword would make a significant difference to the experiences of foreign nationals in prison.

Friday releases

Around 40% of the men registered with the Helpline were released on a Friday. Friday releases (which include people with release dates over the weekend or a bank holiday) unnecessarily put people at increased risk of homelessness, substance misuse and a return to previous patterns of behaviour. This is because some of the most crucial support organisations, including probation and housing services, often run reduced or no services on Fridays and over the weekend. The increased numbers being released on Fridays mean that releases are often later in the day exacerbating the challenge of connecting with support services.

There is often a window of opportunity for people on release when they are determined to make change and not return to prison. However, this can be quickly lost when the obstacles seem impossible. Friday was always the most pressured day on the Helpline as coaches raced to get support in place for people before services closed for the weekend or, even worse, a bank holiday.

Akib was released without accommodation at 4pm on a Friday. He was told in prison that his probation officer had details of a hotel, but had not been able to reach them all day. Akib had no family to stay with and wanted to avoid previous friends and the associated risk factors. StandOut was also unable to reach Akib's probation officer and so issued an emergency accommodation grant to cover the weekend period so that Akib didn't spend his first days of release sleeping rough.

Together with other organisations in the sector, we call for urgent action to end Friday releases so that more people are given a real chance to move forward after prison.

CONCLUSIONS

Nothing in this report is new or surprising. It is a refrain that has been **repeated** over time by many others working in the justice sector. The pandemic, and our work in response on the Helpline, has only brought it into sharper focus.

People leaving prison need the best possible chance to rebuild their lives if they are to move out of the justice system for good. For many people, key to achieving that is long-term holistic support through a relationship based on **trust**.

But it is also critical that key essentials are in place at the point of release. Without them, people face a real risk of slipping back into the system, harming more people and communities, and costing public money.

In the light of our experience running the Helpline, we call for the following to be in place at the point of release so everyone stands a chance to fulfil their potential:

- Somewhere **safe to live**

- The **basic essentials** in order to survive:
 - Mobile phone with credit
 - Food, clothing, and money for travel
 - ID and a bank account

Only when these markers of **stability** are in place can someone start to consider **employment or training**.

We join others in also calling for urgent action to:

- Increase support for **people on remand** in line with support for all prison leavers

- Increase capacity of the **immigration services** in prison

- End **Friday releases**

It has been a **bittersweet privilege** to support people through the pandemic, highlighting the enormous need face by those leaving prison and the gaps in support available. It has also confirmed the value of long term, holistic, face to face work which underpins our work in normal times.

THANKS

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- The Grocers' Charity

ABOUT STANDOUT

StandOut, a London-based charity, runs intensive programmes for people preparing to leave prison followed by one-to-one support offered after release for as long as is required. In response to Covid-19, StandOut expanded to run a helpline which provided practical support and coaching to more than 600 prison leavers in London. StandOut empowers people with the confidence and resilience needed for lasting stability and employment.



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